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## “THE GREAT COMMISSION”: DOES IT MERIT THE NAME?

(MATT. 28:18-20; MARK 16:15; LUKE 24:46-48; ACTS 1:8)

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All three Synoptists agree that the final theme of our Lord's instruction to his disciples was the world's evangelization. Neither master, disciple, nor evangelist, however, is responsible for the title by which that final charge has commonly been known. The title is the spontaneous characterization of later ages. How far is it deserved? In what respects do the context and content of this charge point it out as truly a “Great Commission”?

### I. Great in position.

This last command has the advantage of a most emphatic position. It is no less than the last word of Christ to his friends. Last words may have supreme significance. They may be reserved for the end that nothing spoken later may blur the impression. A sacredness attaches to a final wish, a dying blessing, such as no word preceding it could ever win.

But this is not only Christ's final *word*, it is Christ's final *deed*. The commission is the necessary logical outcome and application of all that had gone before since Christ first called the Twelve to follow him. It contains the practical meaning of all the preaching and instruction, and not of that alone: of all the planning and praying also, of all the faithfulness and fearlessness and sorrow and sacrifice. Galilee and Samaria and Perea and Judea are incomplete without this. Olivet and Gethsemane and Calvary and the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea are incomplete without this. Whatever Christ has said or done or suffered from the beginning, if it have any outlet into the future at all, must find that outlet through this charge which sends the disciples out fitted to be channels of living water to the world.

Yet this is not all. To grasp the position of this final command of Jesus we must obviously go back of Jesus, and include in our view the entire revelation of God up to his day. What is Jesus with reference to the revelations preceding him? The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews answers: "God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." Jesus, then, is the climax of all past revelation from the beginning. And here in the commission is the climax of the revelation of Jesus. We may not then stop short of saying that the command "Go ye!" is the crystallization of God's whole redemptive purpose from the beginning of the world, the august gateway through which the hoarded wealth of God's disclosures passes on its way into the future.

## II. Great in conception.

Consider the vastness of the idea. It is vast as the world, as history, as all human life. "Go ye into all the world": there go the space-limits. "Make disciples of all nations": there go the race-limits. "Preach the gospel to the whole creation," that is, to every man, woman, and child who shall be created: there go the time-limits. Surely a charge before which all human boundaries thus fall flat is great in outline and idea.

Yet this is no vast, vague, and empty notion such as our own broad notions are apt to be; it is shot all through with the warmth and vitality which characterized the life of Christ. Men believe after a fashion today in a gospel for all men, in universal brotherhood. They believe in the modern, scientific doctrine of an original birth of all men from one pair, who may as well have been Adam and Eve as any others. All men are by nature brothers, and ought to be such in point of fact. Yet that is little more than the preparation for the conception of universal brotherhood which Christ entertained. Brotherhood to Christ was *acting* the brother. Christ could weep over his conception of universal brotherhood. Men are not always able to weep over theirs.

Yet, if brotherhood was not merely intellectual with Christ, neither was it purely sentimental; and the last commission was not mere emotion, but an enterprise for which Jesus felt himself to be *personally adequate*. To Jesus the commission was practicable. He was

“able to save unto the uttermost all that came unto God by him.” He had not been born in vain. He had not been crucified in vain. He had not gone down into the tomb in vain. “It is finished!” he had cried; and henceforth he was the propitiation, not alone for Peter’s sins and for John’s sins and for James’s sins and for Nathanael’s sins, but for the sins of the whole world. “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.” The last commission is an appeal to lift him up under all skies and before all eyes, that he may exercise his drawing power over all men.

But another and final feature must be added if the full greatness of this conception is to appear. I refer to the deep undertone of responsibility which, though unexpressed, seems to vibrate through it. Ability, with Jesus, meant responsibility. “The Son of man must needs suffer.” He could die; therefore he must die. Now, after the “must” of the passion came the “must” of the commission; for, having died once to die no more, could he fail to think of that day so closely connected with the issues of his death—the day, namely, when men should be judged according to the death he had died and the gospel he had given? Jesus had repeatedly pictured to the disciples that day—the heavens aflame, the Son appearing on the clouds with all his hosts, and the awful summons to the earth to appear before the throne. Could this have been absent from his thought? The solemn greatness of the last commission will not appear till one sees in the deep background of it the flashings of that day which shall ere long burst like a thief upon the astonished world, and bring to a long end the crime and shame and stain of sin.

### III. Great in promise.

The promise, “I am with you,” is obviously not to be dissociated from the command to which it is attached. “Go, and I will be with you.” “If you go, I will be with you”, it might have been written. Christ has thus attached to the missionary enterprise the altogether most remarkable promise of his personal presence.

There is a sense, of course, in which Christ is with all men, whether they go or not, whether they believe or not, whether they do righteously or sinfully. But in the comforting and stimulating sense intended it is not thus general. The directing and sustaining grace of Jesus, the boundless revelations of Jesus’ love, the cheering look of Jesus

and his uplifting smile—these are not treasures for the deaf and disobedient. Christ is not with those who are against him.

The promise is the power of the fulfilment. I see those men of old, scattered by persecution from Jerusalem through Judea, Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth, preaching the word. "Alas," they say, "for our weakness." The answer comes: "I am with you." "Ah, Lord, but the nations are many and the world is wide, and the resistance of men to thy rule is very bitter and very strong."—"I am with you!" "Ah, but our strength falters and our heart fails, and tender are the ties that must be rent, and many are the dangers of the sea, the darkness, and the desert-sands."—"I am with you!" "Ah, but kings are cruel, and love not thy law. Their swords are sharp, and there burns the fire to eat up our flesh."—"I am with you!" And so, comforted and assured, those early ones look heavenward, and whisper: "Yea, Lord, it is enough!"

#### IV. Great in authority.

"Go!" This word consists of only two letters, but it contains the power of two worlds.

We may not say, perhaps, that there is more of heaven's authority behind this command than behind any other; yet this command makes prominent the fact of authority as does no other. From this command the disciples could not but draw the inference that Jesus believed in his own right to command *anything*.

And is not this the meaning of the prefatory words: "All authority is given unto me in heaven and on earth"? "All power," the Authorized Version put it; "all authority," the Revised Version more truly says. The "power" is not absent, but it lurks in the background, while the "right" is brought forward and emphasized. "I have the right of God to command: go, therefore!"

And certainly this was fully understood by the disciples themselves. They had not been for three years under Christ's authority in vain. The school of Christ was the school of obedience. To be sure, authority on his part and obedience on theirs did not exhaust the relationship:—"I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you." And yet, just as the iron framework is concealed behind the graceful lines of the building, just as the eternal rock underlies the budding and blos-

soming ground, so behind their whole relationship to this heaven-sent Jesus lay the great and undisputed fact of the authority of God.

It was this twofold assumption of right on his side and of obedience on theirs that enabled Jesus to put forth such a command as this without qualifications or conditions. These men were committed to his will. Why, then, need he stop to remind them not to give heed to material allurements? Had they not already forsaken all and followed him? Why need he pause to remind them that his claims upon them transcended the claims of family or friends? Had he not said to them at the start: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me"? Why need he at this late date warn them to think twice before undertaking a work which would certainly jeopardize their lives? Had he not checked them at the beginning with the parable of the king going out to meet twenty thousand with only ten thousand, showing that the start was the time to sit down and count the cost? And had he not enunciated that principle, so hard to realize, yet basal in his teaching, that "whosoever will save his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall find it"? All these things had been settled long before. There was no occasion for raising them now.

This, then, these men fully accepted and understood, that they were committed to the authority of Christ. Whatever the word "believe" meant before, "go" meant now. Whatever the word "follow" meant before, "go" meant now. The command to go was the résumé and test of all their obedience from the start till now; indeed, it was in the going that all the believing and the following were to take effect. They could not believe without going. They could not follow without going. They could not be anything real to their master, nor could he on his part be anything real to them, unless now this supreme command was obeyed within the bosom of which all other commands were involved. They perceived it at a glance; and because they were radically loyal, they went.